

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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A HISTORY OF THE PROCTOR PLAYERS CLUB



"The Snare and the Fowler", presented in competition, 1938. (l-r, rear) Tony Lendway, Ben Westin, director Wallace Fay; (l-r, front) Joe Ladabouche, Mario Gatti.

Wallace Fay (1896–1976)

Howard Dionne called him “the father of the Proctor Players Club”. Rita Rinehart remembers him as the “person you went to” seeking advice, or needing something for the latest production of the Club. These two long-time members of the Proctor Players recall that, for two generations of Proctor Players, Wallace McFie Fay was the driving force and spiritual mentor of the Club.

Affectionately known as “Wally”, he was born on 30 January 1896 in Fort Covington, New York. He came to Proctor in 1913 (barely 17 years old!) to work as a timekeeper in the Vermont Marble mills. An early cast photograph shows a young Wally Fay in a pre-1929 production of the Proctor Community Players. At work he rose rapidly through the ranks at the marble company, reaching the position of vice president and company director by the end of his career. His position and influence in what evolved as the Proctor Players Club were equally impressive.

Listed as one of the organizers of the Proctor Players Club in 1929, Wally Fay became its first president. From there he jumped right into play production work, directing many plays and entertainments during the next three decades. He was an excellent actor, too. In 1930, he triumphed in the anti-war play “Journey’s End” by both directing and taking the lead role as Captain Stanhope. The *Rutland Herald* critic wrote: “It is fair to say that in some scenes Wallace Fay had me all teared up again, which is not fair.” Fay starred with Cornelia Gale in “Mrs. Moonlight”, a great hit during the period, as well as many other shows including the title role in “Julius Caesar” (1957). He was involved in all areas of stagecraft including (with Ben Westin) the design and construction of the Town Hall lighting console.

Wally Fay’s life span nearly paralleled that of the Club. Proctor Players lost their Town Hall home in 1974. Wallace Fay died in 1976.

In the *Rutland Herald* obituary (26 April 1976), much is written about Fay’s political and business contributions. Only one line mentions the Proctor Players Club. To thousands of Rutland County dwellers, however, this Club was a vital part of the cultural scene and Wallace McFie Fay was its mentor, bringing skill, talent, energy and, most importantly, devotion to the Club. He was a true giant in New England’s Little Theater movement and will be long remembered.

Dorothy Baker (1901–1992)

The *Rutland Herald* described Dorothy as a “well-known area actress and director”. She came to Proctor Players during this period and began her long career with the Club, mainly as its director of musicals. These productions, often under the sponsorship of the American Association of University Women, were highly popular and well attended. When interviewing people today regarding the Club, two names are always mentioned: Wallace Fay and Dotty Baker.

Keep the Standard High

A History of the Proctor Players Club

By Peter Cooper

"I believe we should . . . keep the standard high. We . . . have a public to interest and should have a varied program that may . . . include some classics, melodramas, farce and modern comedy. All our people do not enjoy the same type of entertainment." This was part of President Wallace Fay's message to the members of the Proctor Players Club. The time was May 1930, which, according to archives kept at the Proctor Free Library, was about one year after the founding of the Proctor Players Club. Or was it?

Dorothy (Dotty) Baker, long-time Proctor Players director, found a photograph among the famous "Rogues Gallery" of lobby pictures which had hung on the walls of the Proctor Town Hall and which was dated 1903. Shown in the cast of this early play, called "The Country School", are Redfield Proctor, Jr., (who directed and starred in the production) and Benjamin Williams, vice president of the Vermont Marble Company. Productions such as this, mounted in the early years of the century, were produced in the Village Hall, built in 1886 and located on the bluff west of downtown. Its small auditorium on the third floor provided adequate space for local presentations by the Proctor Community Club. This building also served as the first Proctor High School. The Proctor Community Club continued in this hilltop location through 1929. Then, according to Baker, the Little Theater group reorganized and relocated in the Proctor Town Hall, which was built in 1909 and stood between the Sutherland Club and the old Post Office block.

Baker also wrote that the little theater group took the name of the Proctor Players Club, with Wallace Fay as its president. In 1974, when the Town Hall was condemned, the group again reorganized and became the Marble Valley Players. It continues to this day. Since the wings of the mythical Phoenix seem to hover over this durable theater group, it can probably be regarded as the oldest continuing amateur theater in the United States, still fresh and vigorous after 90 years, but no longer with a permanent home.

According to minutes recorded in three thick volumes stored at the Proctor Free Library, the Community Players had reorganized themselves at a meeting on 17 July 1929 at the Proctor Free Library. With the name of Proctor Players Club, it elected Fay as its first president. Since many of the organizers, including Redfield Proctor, Jr., were already experienced in stagecraft, the new group moved forward without interruption. For example, the annual free Christmas Entertainment for the people of Proctor was continued, as well as the custom of play-reading, discussing New York play reviews and presenting performances of one-act plays at regular monthly meetings of the Club. All this was in addition to several full productions staged in the Town Hall for the enjoyment of the public.

The 1929-1930 season saw such productions as "The Florist Shop", "The Romancers", "Thank You, Doctor" and that early Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, "Cox and Box". The Club, from its inception, saw itself as a service to the community and often produced plays as a benefit, or in joint sponsorship with such organizations

as the Proctor P.T.A., the American Legion, the Lions, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. The Players Club would later join with the American Association of University Women to raise money for scholarships for young Rutland County women. Proceeds from the annual Children's Play went to the Vermont Association for the Crippled, now known as the Vermont Achievement Center. Children from VAC and the Brandon Training School for the developmentally disabled were always included as guests at the performances.

Proctor was a company town and the Vermont Marble Company was a great supporter of the club. In fact, many of its officers and employees were members of Proctor Players, principally company president Redfield Proctor, Jr., and vice president Benjamin Williams, as well as vice president, Wallace Fay. By 1930 the Club counted 86 members, including such active folks as Sarah Humphrey, Hugo A. Ringlund, Howard Geno, Joseph Cizmadia, N.C. Patterson and Tuttle Patterson.

But the bright hopes of Proctor Players were set against the grim Depression settling over the land. The Vermont Marble Company and Redfield Proctor were wracked by labor troubles, as workers struggled for fair wages and the right to unionize. Yet the group flourished and, with other Little Theater groups in Vermont, took part in the various play contests offered during the season. Chief of these was the Dorset Cup for the Best One-Act Play. Letters were sent out to theater representatives such as Wally Fay in Proctor, A. B. Myrick in Burlington, Mary Spargo in Bennington, H. C. Hindley in Rutland and noted author, Dorothy Canfield Fisher in Arlington. On 11-12 July 1930 a full program of one-act plays from The Epworth League, the Valley Players of South Wallingford, The Bennington Players, and the Theatre Club of Burlington was performed at the Dorset Playhouse. Proctor presented "The Flower Shop" by Winifred Hawkridge. It took third prize. For the 1934 Cup, famous critic, Alexander Woollcott (who owned Neshobe Island in Lake Bomoseen), was a judge. Proctor won honorable mention in 1938 with Ben Westin starring as Yvain Chauvigny in B. M. Dix's "The Snare and the Fowler". The Club did not compete every year, as letters in the archives will attest. Several are poignant pleas from the Dorset organizers offering such enticements as awards for Best Performer and Best Stage Design.

But Proctor Players did not stay long aloof from county-wide play contests. One such was the Rutland County Farm Bureau Play Contest. Baker wrote that Rutland County actively supported many amateur theater productions and the Farm Bureau's 1931 effort "entertained 300 people from 12 towns" at the Proctor Town Hall. Entered were P.T.A.s from Ira and Middletown Springs and the Nickwackett Club of Holden. In 1933 Proctor Players hosted buskers (performers) from Holden, Ira, Forestdale, Pittsford, North Clarendon and seven other towns.

In 1931 Club President Tuttle Patterson had reported that the past season was "especially profitable" with a membership of 82. Dues were 50 cents with special student rates. In 1933, Mrs. A. T. Petterson, in her report to the membership, said "The Club has left its swaddling clothes of infancy." She also mentioned the "lusty activities of the Club." At every monthly meeting (September to May), after business was taken care of, a variety of programs was presented. Minutes from these meetings report lectures, demonstrations of stagecraft, one-act plays and play readings. Important were the reviews and critiques of New York theatrical productions given by Redfield Proctor and Wallace Fay. The reports also mention *Rutland Herald* Editor

Howard Hindley as an enthusiastic supporter of the club.

The Depression-era minutes of the thirties reflect the sense that Proctor Players Club was helping to cheer people up in those hard and gloomy days; hence, continuation of the free annual Christmas Entertainment with such popular and recurring themes as "Shepherds Abiding", "Why The Chimes Rang" and, of course, Dicken's classic "Christmas Carol". There were also the benefit performances, a joyous duty Proctor Players maintained right to the end of its Proctor residence. One of its most famous productions (for the benefit of Rutland's unemployed) was "Journey's End".

With the Depression casting its gray pall over the nation, there came a national wave of pacificism. War and militarism suffered severe criticism and became the subject of such anti-war novels as "All Quiet On The Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque and "Johnny Got His Gun" by Dalton Trumbo. When the British play "Journey's End" by R. C. Sheriff came to Broadway, it was universally hailed by exacting New York critics. The Proctor Players Club somehow got the rights and was able to present the play on 10 September 1930 in the Town Hall. Proctor Post 6, American Legion, sponsored the production.

A scrapbook principally devoted to "Journey's End" was found among the library's memorabilia and includes professional photographs of the New York cast, plus a program (Wallace Fay went to New York to see the play). The scrapbook contains many details of the Proctor production. Fay (who also directed) took the lead as Captain Stanhope and the cast featured such Club stalwarts as Tuttle Patterson, Howard Dionne, Hugo Ringlund, Montague Elam and Paul Westin as the young Lieutenant Raleigh. *Rutland Herald* Editor Hindley gave the performance high praise and expressed amazement at the realistic effects of the lights, set and sound.

Tragedy struck the Club "family" in January of 1933 with the death of Paul Westin. Considered a "brilliant" actor, Paul was also extremely popular in Proctor, as well as at the University of Vermont. He was a big hit as Francois Villon in the Club's presentation of "If I Were King" (9 September 1932) after his much-praised performance in "Journey's End". All Proctor mourned his death from pneumonia and the Club published a formal expression of grief. Paul was just 21 years old.

To demonstrate the "family" aspect of Proctor Players, Paul's brother Ben became involved with the Club and served long and faithfully in many jobs including acting, staging and, principally, as chief electrician, light technician and "tech" director. Malvina Westin remembers that her husband Ben always felt that Wallace Fay was his real mentor.

The principal reason that Proctor Players stayed as organized as it did for many years was its use of the Proctor Town Hall. Located in the center of Proctor it served as the home of the Club from 1930 until 1974. A visitor to the Proctor Free Library can view many of the play-cast pictures that formerly lined the lobby and the walls of the Hall.

Already mentioned has been the active support of Redfield Proctor, Jr., and the Vermont Marble Company in the success of the Club. Dotty Baker wrote that in 1954, through Proctor's generosity, the entire Town Hall had been remodelled into a regular theater with ramped orchestra floor, plush seats, curtains and drapes of red velvet. The theater had seats for 300 playgoers! This writer can remember, as an active member of the Club, the famous "Curtain Fund" to which all productions



Early 1900s; railway station setting in Old Village Hall production.



Early production, mounted in Old Village Hall; (r-back row) Redfield Proctor, Jr., founder and benefactor of the drama activities in Proctor. Note early stage lighting system.



Old Village Hall, originally constructed in 1886; third floor added in 1897, incorporating an auditorium.



The Proctor Town Hall (1909–1975) home of the Proctor Players Club for over forty years.



"Gold in the Hills or The Dead Sister's Secret", melodrama presented in 1940. (l-r) Barbara Goodrich, Cornelia Wilbur and Sheila Ives, part of a large cast.



Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie" presented November 1968. Cast included (l-r) Larry Eastwick, Marty Leon, Director Howard Willard, Rita Rinehart and Robert Canney.



"South Pacific", a big hit in 1964; directed by Dorothy Baker (standing 4th from r), Sue Darrow as Nellie Forbush (seated at table l, with child on knee) Fred Elwert as Luther Billis (far r, second to end). Last man at r in uniform is Attorney J. Fred Carbine, Jr.



Everyone looked forward to the annual Proctor Players Club children's show. Above is the cast of "Pinocchio" (1967). Play featured original music by George Skopp, Jr., original script and lyrics by Peter Cooper who also directed. Skopp and Cooper seen at far right, second row. Center in dark sweater and cap is Peter Smith, the naughty little puppet who wanted to be a boy. Play revived in 1981 by Marble Valley Players.

were required to contribute. The design of the Hall as a theater was simple: seats sloping toward the apron of the stage, a generous stage with "masking" curtains, space backstage and room overhead to fly sets. To get to the dressing rooms one had to go down winding stairs from backstage (a little cramped). The men's dressing room was on one side and the women's on the other. Often, during performances, entrances required crossing the rooms. All this was handled with much courtesy and muffled laughter. Sets from previous productions were stored in the basement, as well as rack after rack of costumes.

The Hall had a small jail cell situated down a few steps in the basement and between the dressing rooms. Over the years, "Knights of the Road" (drunk and sober) would be lodged overnight in this cell. Many a lodger departed in the morning, head filled with visions of actors in full makeup and costumes declaiming lines or singing show tunes. This writer can remember during the run of "Oklahoma!", a derelict waking up in the famous cell. Upon spotting a bevy of lovely young ladies in period costumes, he promptly declared he had died and gone to heaven. Surely this was the most unique "drunk tank" in all of Vermont!

But an amateur play group with its very own theater is rare and, sadly, it could not last. The Town of Proctor decided that it needed the space to build a new fire station. The Town Hall space itself was heated, courtesy of the Vermont Marble Company. The heat was cut off in 1974. Long-time Club member, Rita Rinehart, remembers that use of the Town Hall was, therefore, cut off from the Proctor Players when engineers condemned the building as structurally unsound. Despite the protest raised, the Proctor Town Hall was demolished in 1975. It had seen close to 50 years of exemplary amateur theater. The Proctor Fire Station now stands in its location. Local director/actor Ted Pendleton remembers that "Butterflies Are Free" was the last play performed in the old Proctor Town Hall.

In recalling its legacy in residence, the Proctor Players Club, along with the rest of the country, came out of the Depression and flourished during the fifties and sixties. The membership increased one year to three hundred theater devotees. Dotty Baker wrote that Redfield Proctor let the play group use his camp and farm in Goshen. He fitted up his red barn with a dance floor, a fieldstone fireplace, rustic gallery, furnace for cold weather and lanterns wired for electricity. Evidently, many a Club annual meeting and soiree were held here, complete with one-act plays, musical entertainments, buffets and dances.

The Club had become involved with aspiring Proctor High students and helped in play contests and direction. When high schoolers had raised a rumpus at the 1934 Christmas Play, the Club received a note of apology from Principal Clarence L. Joy, calling the students' behavior "unpardonable discourtesies".

Space does not permit listing all of the productions during the earlier time. Standouts included "Where's Alice" (1932) with Cornelia Gale and Hal Smith, "Gold In The Hills or The Dead Sister's Secret" (1942) with Barbara Goodrich, eleven-year-old Sheila Fay, Joe Cizmadia, Viljo Maki, Fred Raymond and Paul Bresnehan.

In 1939 the Club returned to Shakespeare, presenting Orson Welles' shortened version of "Richard III". An adjustable set had been designed and built by Guy Pierce of Dorset. It was used in this and many other plays through the years.

Cornelia Gale, winner of the Proctor High School oratory contest, starred in "Mrs Moonlight" (with Wallace Fay) to great acclaim. Miss Gale was later to play

the doomed Queen of Scotland in "Mary Stuart" (1937).

The Club took a venture into pageantry and politics in 1941 with a unique production written by State Senator Walter Hard and Representative Wallace Fay. The first part was a mock session of legislature and the second was titled "The Saga Of Vermont".

PROCTOR FREE LIBRARY



Elegantly costumed cast of "Mary Stuart". Center (l-r) Frances French as Queen Elizabeth; Howard R. Pfaelzer, director, and Cornelia Gale as Mary.

By the fifties, attendance dwindled at regular monthly meetings, but the Club was always able to muster a full cast and crew for productions. Many factors contributed to the shrinkage including, as Dotty Baker put it, television: the stay-at-home amusement park. This decade and the next saw the advent of the musicals.

After the Town Hall renovation, the Club began moving away from old fashioned melodramas and "down home" comedy and into more modern fare. In fact, the christening play of the renovated theater was Genet's "Mad Woman Of Chaillot". Other plays presented during this decade were "You Can't Take It With You" (1950) with Gladys Tillberg, Fred Raymond, Sam Gallus and Wallace Fay; "Dear Ruth" (1952) featuring Lyrace Fontaine and Paul Bresnehan; "The Hasty Heart" (1954) starring the young English actor Colin Greenan as Lachlin MacLachlin and "Blithe Spirit" (1958) with Dorothy Baker as Madame Arcati.

Returning to Shakespeare in 1957 (and the last Shakespearean play presented by the Club) they chose "Julius Caesar". This great play (the Orson Welles shortened version) had an all-male cast except for the two minor women's parts of Calpurnia (Lyrace Fontaine) and Portia (Judith Hyde). The famous Romans were played by Wallace Fay (Caesar), Raymond LaVigne (Antony), Robert Harrah (Brutus) and Thomas Geno (Cassius). A complete playbook of this production exists at the Proctor

Free Library and contains a detailed essay on the staging of the production, plus some "live action" photos taken during dress rehearsal.

More "hit" productions came across the boards during the Sixties. Such plays as "Lost Horizon" (1960), which featured John Hancock and Vic Brewer. Brewer was to become a stalwart during the latter days of the Club, starring in many plays (such as "The Fourposter") and culminating in the starring role in "Inherit The Wind" (with Ted Pendleton as his lawyer nemesis). The play was a fictionalized account of the famous Stokes "Monkey Trial" of the twenties.

What was it like being a part of Proctor Players? Rita Rinehart, Ted Pendleton and Howard Willard were interviewed. All three of them did considerable work for the Club as actors, directors and stage crew. Rinehart arrived in Proctor in 1957 and immediately got a starring role in "Holiday For Lovers". Pendleton was to have the same experience when he joined in 1971 and was cast as Willy Loman in "Death Of A Salesman". For Rinehart there were no "favorite" roles, because she enjoyed every play she was in. "I miss the camaraderie, the good, solid friends," she said, remembering the way the Club made her feel a part of things. Pendleton was also struck by the acceptance of people in the Club, bringing a new person right into the center. Baker wrote that Proctor Players was never an exclusive "Proctor" Club, but had members from all over the county.

Rutlander Howard Willard came over to Proctor at the time Dorothy Baker asked Sylvia Willard to direct "The Man Who Came To Dinner". Sylvia had experience in the New York theater. He landed the part of Banjo and Castleton College professor Saul Elkin played the caustic Sheridan Whiteside. Willard also directed "The Odd Couple" and "Glass Menagerie", which featured Larry Eastwick as the Gentleman Caller. Larry was to go on to direct the musical spoof "Little Mary Sunshine", which featured the writer of this article as "Uncle" Oscar Fairfax. Larry's father, Warren Eastwick, was also active in the Club. (The Willards later went on to help establish Actors Repertory in Rutland.)

The big musicals rolled in (directed by Dotty Baker). They were: "South Pacific" (you can spot Ben Westin's son Alan as a sailor in the cast picture), "The King And I" with Vic Brewer as the King, "The Sound Of Music" and "Oklahoma!" [The latter is close to this writer's heart! It was his first audition for the Club and he won the part of Judge Andrew Carnes, father of Ado Annie Carnes, wonderfully played by Carol Ward.] Others featured in the cast were Carolyn Champine as Laurey, Tom Levins as curly, Bob Smatresk as Will, Sue Darrow as Aunt Eller and George Skopp, Jr., as Ali Hakim.

Skopp was later to collaborate with this author on "Pinocchio", the 1967 children's play. Skopp wrote original music for the classic and later would write and direct "Little Lame Prince" for the Club.

The Proctor Players Club was one of the great cultural influences in Rutland County. Its 44 years of bringing plays, Christmas entertainments, benefits and encouragement of young people in the theater created wonderful impressions that remain to this day. More than that, it brought a sense of comradeship among the members that made it possible not only to present fine productions but to take satisfaction in a job well done. At the present time, where so much entertainment is packaged and superficial in appeal, this Club, this band of volunteers and their productions, will always glow like a precious jewel in the annals of Rutland County.

The Proctor Players Club ceased to exist under that name after 1974. The closing of the Town Hall sealed the Club's fate. But the Phoenix bird, like a guardian angel, hovered nearby. The Club in changing its name to Marble Valley Players continues to offer Little Theater in the county. This ongoing organization has compiled an impressive roster of productions and some day its full story should be told.



PETER COOPER is an author and lecturer who lives in Rutland with his wife Julie and a cat named Muffey. He was a member of the Proctor Players Club and was later active in the Marble Valley Players, Actors Repertory and Sometime Theater (all Rutland area amateur theater groups).

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PROCTOR FREE LIBRARY



"Julius Caesar" by William Shakespeare presented by the Club in May 1957. Shown are Lyrace Fontaine as Calpurnia and Judith Hyde as Portia.

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